

the Boundary Commission, and began to draft his report. Soon the steady labor involved brought peace. He abandoned his tourist program, stuck to his task, and plunged into the mass of details.

Evidently this attitude on his part perplexed somebody. After he had dined and was wavering between "Phèdre" at the theater and a disquisition on Usbeg Tartars in his room, he was asked to go to the hotel office. There a polite official requested the pleasure of seeing his passport. Such a proceeding in the Russia of to-day is unusual in the case of reputable foreigners traveling through the country. Armstrong felt that some person of influence had stirred up the authorities to make things uncomfortable.

The police agent was surprised when the document was produced. It was a Foreign Office passport, visé by the Russian Ambassador in London, and indorsed by the Governor of Baku, the latter authorization having been obtained by the Colonel of Cossacks.

"It is in perfect order, gospodin," said the man gravely, returning it.

"But why have you examined it?" demanded Armstrong. "Why have you picked me out of dozens of people in the hotel for this personal scrutiny?"

The policeman shrugged his shoulders.

"You are obeying orders, of course," went on Armstrong. "However, I shall make it my business to report the incident to the Ministry of the Interior. I regard it as an affront."

The man vanished. The hotel employees groveled. Here was one who dared to question the proceedings of the all-powerful police.

The next twenty-four hours left him, as far as he knew, without further surveillance. He grew impatient as the hour for the arrival of the Saratoff train passed and nothing happened. He was beginning to think that some stupid hoax had been perpetrated on him, when, while he was dressing for dinner, a letter was slipped under the door of his room.

He heard the rustle of the paper on the carpet and darted to the door to look out. A serving-maid was hurrying away along the corridor. He called to her, but she whisked out of sight. The letter itself was as perplexing as the manner of its delivery. It had not been written long, and it read:

Sir—I, Vladimir Sassulitch, sent to you the telegram from Atkarsk in the name of your English friend, Prince Melnikoff has lied. Your friend and his father are not absent on a shooting excursion. They are prisoners in the hands of Prince Melnikoff's adherents, who pose as outlaws. Lady Ermyntude Grandson is virtually a prisoner in the palace of Bannofka. She will be cajoled or forced into a marriage with the Prince, as the price of the deliverance of her father and brother. I have warned her in the past; but unfortunately she did not understand my motives, and it is probable that she revealed something to Prince Melnikoff, as my helpers in the palace were suspected and have been removed. Some of them will die. You, as an Englishman and a friend of the family, may be able to help Lady Ermyntude and the others. That is why I have come to Moscow to see you.

There followed an elaborate direction of the manner in which, by using various doors of the Salon des Variétés, he could baffle any pursuer, reach a side street, and walk to a house not far distant.

Armstrong disliked and distrusted this melodramatic proceeding. He knew not what wild adventure it portended, while the statements in the letter were hardly credible. Nevertheless, the name of the writer, coinciding with that of the woman found dead at Ascot, and the undoubted knowledge the man possessed of his telegram to Lord Carlingham, led him to keep the rendezvous.

In case of a trap being laid for him, he secured the letter in his despatch-box after copying its instructions. Then, if he was arrested, it would be available to prove his good faith.

It was not until he stood face to face with Sassulitch and heard from the man's lips a faithful and surprisingly minute account of all that had taken place at Bannofka that he realized the full extent of the plot laid against Ermyntude, no less than the risk of the enterprise to

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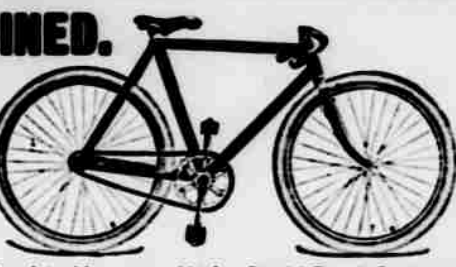


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which he was asked to commit himself. On the one hand, the girl was to be tricked into a marriage which would extricate Prince Melnikoff from many difficulties and place him firmly in position as Governor of Bannofka and autocrat of a Province as large as Scotland. On the other, were she rescued in time, there would be marshaled against those who helped her all the might of a ruler who disposed of men's lives and fortunes.

Above all, Frank had only the word of a broken man, admittedly a friend, if not an active member, of the secret organization which burrows, mole-like, in Russian political life, and against which czarism wages incessant war. Ermyntude might be willing to marry the Prince—Sassulitch said she was not; but her brother actually had given him a date fixed for the ceremony.

The way was dark and vague; but his hesitation did not continue long. If he could see Ermyntude herself, a word from her lips would dispel the cloud of uncertainty and doubt that obscured all recent transactions at Bannofka. He agreed, under certain restrictions, to meet Sassulitch at the Ryazan Station next morning and travel with him to the Volga.

Late into the night he wrote and ended the draft report. He inclosed it with a letter to his London agents, asking them to hand it to the Foreign Office if he did not send further instructions within a fortnight.

At that very hour, Julie, Ermyntude's maid, was crying hysterically at her mistress's knees. She had witnessed involuntarily the hanging of the telegraph operator at Bannofka. He had copied a message once too often.

And Ermyntude, pallid and wide-eyed with terror, was murmuring a prayer for help. Unnoticed, among the pile of letters and newspapers which daily reached the castle from England, was Frank's letter to her brother. She had opened it before, thinking that the time did not brook hesitation on such a point, and therein read the plain record of Prince Melnikoff's duplicity.

What did it all portend? Toward what fate was she drifting? Her mother had telegraphed that she was ill and unable to leave London. Was that a lie too?

(To be continued next Sunday)

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

FRANK ARMSTRONG, a young British army officer, who had acquired an intimate knowledge of the Russian language and customs, was home in London on leave, where he renewed his acquaintance, begun in St. Petersburg, with the Earl of Valletort and his wife Lord Carlingham their son, and Lady Ermyntude their daughter. The party attended a lecture at the Anarchists' Club, where they conversed with a Russian in the audience. At a party at the Valletorts' home at Ascot, Armstrong found that the Russian Prince Boris Melnikoff (a "Little Czar") was courting Ermyntude, with whom he was in love, but dared not aspire to one so high above him socially. When out riding, a bomb was thrown at Melnikoff, who escaped uninjured, however, though he was enraged at the loss of an opal talisman that he wore. Armstrong found the opal, and was curious to note that it bore on one side three golden triangles, or pyramids, the same design as he had seen on the handle of a knife owned by the Russian at the Anarchists' Club. When he returned it to Melnikoff, the latter appeared anxious that all knowledge of it be kept secret. When he started back to London, Armstrong encountered at the station the same Russian seen at the meeting, and accosted him. Melnikoff explained to Ermyntude that there was a tradition that when the opal was broken his family line would cease to exist. He proposed marriage to her, but they were interrupted before she could answer. The Russian (whose name was Ivan Stepanovitch) introduced Armstrong to a young woman named Natushka, whom he called his sister, who, he said, was the plighted wife of Melnikoff. The body of a Russian woman, tied with cords, was found in a pond near where Melnikoff was assailed. When Armstrong told Melnikoff of meeting the Russians, the Prince displayed considerable trepidation; but said he and Ivan were of the same house, that Natushka was Ivan's ward, not his sister, and that a "foolish" marriage compact for him (Melnikoff) and the girl had been made in their infancy by their parents. Melnikoff's valet lured Armstrong into a vacant house in London, and left him there locked in. Frank escaped, and departed for Anglo-India, where he was assigned to work with a boundary commission. A letter from Carlingham announced that Ermyntude would marry Melnikoff; that Carlingham, the Earl and Ermyntude were going to spend the winter on the Prince's estate at Bannofka; and that the girl found murdered in the Ascot pond was named Vera Sassulitch. Armstrong caught one of his servants copying his letters. The latter explained that he had been paid to copy all letters containing the name Melnikoff. Boris, at Bannofka, begged Ermyntude to marry him at once, on the plea that his promotion to the governorship of the Province prevented his going to England. A Russian, Vladimir Sassulitch, who secretly entered her apartment, informed her that his daughter Olga Sassulitch was married to Melnikoff, and that the Czar had declared the marriage morganatic. Ermyntude refused to marry Boris. Ermyntude was warned anonymously not to visit the Dakhof Monastery; but disobeyed the hint. On the way home the party was attacked, and her father and brother disappeared, evidently having been taken prisoners.